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ABSTRACT

The single most reliable finding in the literature on depression is that women are more likely than men to report and show signs of depressive symptomatology. A distribution of depression scores was analyzed for community women as a function of two factors: employment status, i.e., housewives versus employed women, and social class. The participants (N=109) were interviewed and completed the CES-D scale, a self-report depression scale. Results showed that social class was important: women in the low status group were more depressed than women in the high status group. Differences between housewives and employed women were not significant. These findings are similar to results of other community studies examining depression among women. (Author/KMF)

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Depression Among Women:
The Effects of Social Class and Employment

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Depression Among Women:
The Effects of Social Class and Employment[1]

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The single most reliable finding in the epidemiology literature on depression is that women are more likely than men to report, and show signs of depressive symptomatology (Becker, 1974; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1975; Radloff, 1975; Silverman, 1968; and Weissman & Klerman, 1977). A huge amount of research has been done to try and answer the question: Why are women more depressed than men?

Pauline Bart (1974) studied the records of 533 depressed women and found that those who were in the traditional female role, that is, housewives, were more likely to respond with depression when their children left home. She concluded: "When women are socialized into traditional female roles, deriving their conceptions of self solely from the mother and wife roles... they are prone to depression in middle age if they loose these roles" (p.154). Bart goes on to predict that "recent changes in our society such as the incresing participation of women in the labor force...should reduce the incidence of depression among middle-aged women in the future" (p.154).

Speculations such as these have led researchers to compare the incidence of depression among housewives and women employed outside of the home, to see if employment really does make a

[1]This study was supported by NIMH grant #1 R01-MH31595 awarded to Faye Crosby, Ph.D. (Yale University).

difference for women. Weissman and Paykel (1974) studied 40 depressed women, housewives and employed women, under psychiatric treatment. Regarding performance of work roles, they found that the employed women were less distressed, showed less impairment of performance and less disinterest, had fewer feelings of inadequacy, had less time lost, and received a higher overall evaluation rating, compared to the housewives in the sample. In other words, the employed women were less impaired in their work role and felt better about what they were doing than the housewives did. Weissman and Paykel hypothesize that outside employment serves some "protective function" for women by providing an opportunity "to escape the otherwise omnipresent demands of the family... (and it) provides a new set of relations and satisfactions" (p.75). Housework does not.

A similar study (Mostow & Newberry, 1975) compared 21 depressed housewives to a matched group of 21 depressed women with outside employment. It was found that the employed women were more symptomatic when they came for treatment, but tended to recover faster than did the housewives. These housewives also showed less interest in their work, did their regular chores less effectively, and were troubled by feelings of inadequacy. Mostow and Newberry (1975), like Weissman and Paykel (1974), conclude that work outside the home offered the depressed women some protection and distraction. The authors here point outthat their sample was self-selected from the lower socio-economic classes, and to determine the overall

prevalence of depression among employed women and housewives, a random sampling of the community must be done.

A few such community studies have recently been reported in the literature. Using data from a Chicago survey, Gove and Geerken (1977) found that compared to employed women, housewives reported that they regularly experience more demands, more feelings of lonliness, more psychiatric symptoms, and have a greater desire to be alone. However, results from Radloff's (1975) community survey showed that housewives were not more depressed than working wives, unless happiness with job and marriage were held constant. A different survey (Brown and Harris, 1978), which involved 458 women living in Camberwell, an Inner London borough, showed that housewives were more likely to suffer depression than were working wives only when there is some other "provoking agent" present, such as more than three children under the age of 14 living at home.

It seems that social class is one important factor which should be given more attention in this area. The samples used by Weissman and Paykel (1974) and by Mostow and Newberry (1975) involved lower class women only. Radloff (1975) found that women with less education and lower incomes were the most depressed. And depression was much more common among working-class women compared to middle-class women in the Brown and Harris (1978) study. Futhermore, we know that social class predicts such things as symptom manifestation of depression (Becker, 1974).

The purpose of this study was to look at a distribution of depression scores among women in a community as a function of two factors: (1)employment status, that is, housewives versus employed women, and (2)social class.

Method

For this study data concerning 109 women from a Boston suburb were analyzed. The data came from a larger study of women and work (Crosby, 1979). All of the women were white and between the ages of 25 and 40. They were all married and had at least one child living at home. Using a hybrid sampling technique, which combined stratified random sampling and quota sampling procedures, the participants were selected from a published listing of the town residents. Each potential respondent was contacted by letter and by phone. Each participant was interviewed in her home for an hour.

The women were divided into two employment status groups. Housewives worked no more than 10 hours per week for compensation. Employed women worked outside the home for pay, at least 30 hours per week. All of the women were also divided into two social class groups: low and high. The low group had jobs which receive a 40.0 or below on the prestige ratings of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The high social status group had jobs which receive a 61.0 or above on the NORC ratings (Davis, 1974). The housewives social status was assigned according to their husband's job rating. Typical low status jobs were truck driver, sales person, and mechanic. Typical high status jobs were lawyer, physician, and college professor.

The number of women in each of the four groups is shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

During the interview, each of the women completed the CES-D scale, a short self-report scale designed to measure depressive symptomatology in the general population. The CES-D scale consists of 20 symptoms representing the major factors in the clinical syndrome of depression. This scale was developed at the Center for Epidemiologic Studies (NIMH) and it has been shown to have high reliability, validity, and generalizability (Radloff, 1977). The subjects in this study rated each item on a four-point scale according to how frequently the symptom was experienced during the past week. The responses ranged from"Rarely"(less than 1 day) to "Most of the time" (5-7 days). The scores reported here are the sum of all 20 items.

Results

The design of this study permits us now to look at the distribution of depression scores according to both (a)employment status (housewives versus employed women) and, (b)social class (low versus high).

As we can see from Table 1, in this distribution of depression scores, social class is important, but employment status is not. Women in the low social class category reported more depressive symptoms than women in the high group, regardless

of whether or not they were employed outside of the home ($F(1,107)=8.135$, $p=.005$). Secondarily, we see that among the lower class women there is a trend, which does not reach statistical significance, for housewives to have higher depression scores that employed women.

Discussion

These results are similar to the findings of Radloff (1975) and of Brown and Harris (1978). Both of these community studies found strong social class differences, with lower class women being more depressed. And, neither obtained an unqualified difference between housewives and employed women.

The pattern of scores from this study adds important information to the emerging picture of depression among women, and sheds some light on hypotheses which have been proposed to explain these epidemiological findings. I would now like to delve a bit further into what the implications of these findings are for some of the prevailing hypotheses. For this purpose I will concentrate on the housewives only; in this study they represent both the least and the most depressed groups. Data for all four groups are shown in the tables.

Role strain explanations of depression focus on the sheer amount of responsibilities a person has. Since lower class housewives in this study were the most depressed and high status housewives the least depressed, this hypothesis would suggest that the lower class housewives are overloaded with household chores

and responsibilities, compared to their couterparts in the higher social classes. I examined the number of hours per week spent in housework and childcare, as reported by the women in this study. There was essentially no difference between high and low class housewives. Those in the low status group reported spending an average of 83 hours per week on housework and childcare, compared to the 87 hours reported by housewives in the high group. These

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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results do not support a role strain explanation.

Another way of explaining the difference between the two groups of housewives is in terms of the noxiousness of the home environment, since this is where housewives presumably spend much of their time. The women in this study were asked to indicate which of 38 positive and negative emotions they experienced during the previous two days at home. We might expect that, since lower status housewives were more depressed, they experience their homelife as more negative. However, in this study, the women in the low group reported that they experience more positive emotions at home, and about the same number of negative emotions, compared to

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Insert Table 3 about here.

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the high status housewives.

Gove (1972) has suggested a third way of explaining these data. His "dual role" hypothesis would suggest that the high status housewives are less depressed because they have incorporated into their lives additional outlets and sources of gratification. Women in this study were asked about their involvement in different kinds of volunteer and religious activities. Housewives in the high status group reported spending an average of 20.5 hours per month and those in the low status group reported an average of 10.8 hours per month. Here we find some support for a "dual

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Insert Table 4 about here.

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role" explanation.

The findings of this study indicate that women in the lower social classes are more depressed that women in the higher status groups. This can not be explained by class differences in the amount of time spent in housework and childcare, or in the perception of the noxiousness of the home environment. Supplementary data from the housewives support a "dual role" hypothesis, indicating that high status women may have additional outlets and sources of gratification. There was some supporting evidence for the "protective function" of employment, as has been suggested by others (Weissman & Paykel, 1974; Mostow & Newberry, 1975), but this applied to women in the lower social groups only.

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Table 1[a]

Average Depression Scores as a Function of Social Class and Employment Status

		Social Class	
		Low	High
Employment Status	Housewives	12.05 (N=29)	6.50 (N=30)
	Employed Women	9.02 (N=21)	6.62 (N=29)

[a]Higher scores indicate greater depression.

Table 2

Average Number of Hours per Week Spent in Housework and Childcare

		Social Class	
		Low	High
Employment Status	Housewives	82.76	87.47
	Employed Women	44.38	43.41

Table 3

Average Number of Positive Emotions (Out of 12) and Negative Emotions (Out of 26) Experienced at Home During the Previous Two Days

		Social Class	
		Low	High
Positive Emotions	Housewives	5.60	3.93
	Employed Women	4.48	5.55
Negative Emotions	Housewives	4.20	4.17
	Employed Women	2.76	4.66

Table 4

Average Number of Hours per Month Spent in Volunteer and Religious Activities

		Social Class	
		Low	High
Employment Status	Housewives	11.73	20.54
	Employed Women	5.20	8.35